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ABSTRACT

Psycholinguistic theoretical information provides the framework for the argument that talking books, taped books, shared book experiences and composing activities that include real text prepared for a specific audience provide an environment conducive to beginning reading. Six assumptions underlie the learning to read process: (1) children learn to read by making attempts to understand whole text that is meaningful to them; (2) children learn to read by reading often; (3) the process of learning to read must be enjoyable; (4) children improve their reading proficiency by reading materials somewhat beyond their current capacity; (5) children, even nonreaders, can read most materials of interest to them provided they are given sufficient background; and (6) reading and writing are reciprocal processes. (Eighteen references are attached.) (Author/RS)

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HOW DO WE GET THEM STARTED?

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Abstract

Six assumptions underlie the learning to read process offered by the authors: Children learn to read by making attempts to understand whole text that is meaningful to them; children learn to read by reading often; the process of learning to read must be enjoyable; children improve their reading proficiency by reading materials somewhat beyond their current capacity; children, even nonreaders, can read most materials of interest to them provided they are given sufficient background; reading and writing are reciprocal processes. Psycholinguistic theoretical information provides the framework for the argument that talking books, taped books, shared book experiences and composing activites that include real text prepared for a specific audience provide an environment conducive to beginning reading.

If They Learn to Read by Reading, How Do We Get Them Started?

Learning to read is a little like learning to shift gears on a hill. While you may practice each part over and over separately, the time of reckoning actually comes when you're in the car, on a hill, and the car in front of you stops for a light. No matter how much help you've had practicing the right skills, this new act is something quite different. Inevitably there will be some stuttering, stumbling and awkwardness. You may even kill the engine a few times; no one gets it right the first time. But with desire and practice, we can be comforted in the knowledge that nearly everyone is capable of learning to read.

We wish to make it clear at the outset that we agree with the numerous authorities in the field of reading who contend that children learn to read by reading (Goodman, 1970; Allington, 1977; Weaver, 1980). We also agree with Smith (1982) who argues that there is no essential difference between learning to read and reading, and that there are no special skills to be

learned which are not or cannot be learned by reading. In short, the skills necessary for fluent reading are a result of reading, not a prerequisite to fluent reading. One never learns to shift gears on a hill by practicing driving in a flat parking lot.

But can children do such a complex task without being directly taught? Don't they stumble and stutter so much that they lose interest and confidence? How can they keep their engines going when they have to stop and start on hills? Goodman (1986), in applying learning theories from both Piaget and Vygotsky, provides insight.

> children... actively try to understand the world around them, to answer questions the world poses. They are not learners who wait for someone to transmit knowledge to them...To the contrary, they learn primarily through their own actions on external objects (p. 223).

But the line between independence and interdependence is a fine, albeit a critical one. Vygotsky (1978) suggests that collaboration, collective activity and cooperation are crucial to this search for

meaning. He identifies a "zone of proximal development" in which the child is able to solve problems interdependently, with the aid of others more advanced.

> Learning awakens a variety of internal development processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers (p. 90)

Very young children growing up in a literate environment learn to use language as the models around them do--to operate on their environment, to make known their desires, to ask questions, even to direct and control the adults around them. Goodman (1986) provides these three instances of pre-school literacy.

> ...a 3-year-old patiently made rows of circles and lines on a sheet of paper and then said, "Read this to me." ...a 4-year-old pointed to print and asked, "What does this say?" ...another 4-year-old sat for a long time and produced a number of characters, many of which looked like letters

of the alphabet, and then said, "This says me and this says Mommy" (p. 224).

These attempts have largely gone unnoticed and unappreciated because of their nonconventional nature, but researchers such as Marie Clay (1975), Emilia Ferreiro and Ana Teberosky (1982), Yetta Goodman (1983), Jerome Harste (1984), and Gordon Wells (1986) have helped us understand both the cognitive and the social nature of these attempts. Further, they have helped us understand the intuitive awareness 2-, 3-, and 4-year-olds develop as they interact with print at home, on the street, in the grocery store, and on television. Before they ever walk through a school doorway, these researchers tell us, children have learned a great deal about how print works. The obvious question, then, and the one most often asked by teachers of beginning readers is, If children already know a lot about print, and if they learn to read by reading, how do we get them started?

We intend to answer that question by providing suggestions for engaging children with print. However, since the suggestions that we provide are based upon a particular view about the learning to read process, we

believe it is useful to state explicitly the following assumptions that underlie our recommendations.

*Children learn to read by making attempts to understand whole text that is meaningful to them.

*Children learn to read by reading, and they improve their reading by reading often.

*The process of learning to read must be enjoyable.

*Children improve their reading proficiency by reading materials somewhat beyond their current capacity.

*Children, even nonreaders, can "read" most materials of interest to them provided they are given sufficient background.

*Reading and writing are reciprocal processes.

Since the first three assumptions have been discussed extensively in the literature, we will not belabor them. However, we feel that some discussion of the impact of the latter three assumptions is in order since we believe the success of early instructional activities depends heavily upon three specific factors: the reader's interest in constructing meaning from a

particular text, access to sufficient background information, and experience in doing so.

Theory

The reading process requires information from two sources. Information that readers receive from print is often referred to as visual information while the information that is already in the readers' head is referred to as nonvisual. Successful meaning construction requires some combination of information from both of these sources.

According to Smith (1982), the more nonvisual information a reader has, such as high interest or prior experience with the topic, the less visual information or graphic input the reader needs. In short, the less nonvisual information the reader brings to the text, the harder it is to read it. Consequently, the more nonvisual information the reader can employ, the easier it is to read. Our experience tells us that most reading material can be made easy for nearly any reader if the reader is interested in the material, if sufficient background for reading the text is available, and if the material is not beyond the apprehension of the reader.

"Natural" readers illustrate this aspect of the reading process. These are children who learned to read at an early age without the benefit of formal classroom instruction (Huey, 1968). Forestor (1977) discovered that most natural readers learned to read by having a competent reader read aloud familiar stories to them. Usually a story is read and reread until the child knows the story well enough that he/she can read it mainly from memory.

These young readers have stored away a massive amount of background information; the story is familiar and the children have followed along with the reader so often that even the graphic information emerges as meaningful scribbles on the page. So much background has been provided, in fact, that they are able to impress relatives and friends by reading fluently a story they have heard read repeatedly. As other stories are read and reread aloud several times, the number of stories they can read increases. As they become better able to use the print (visual information), they require less nonvisual information since they have extended their knowledge about how print works. Soon these children are able to read materials they have not heard read before.

Theory to Practice

Since we hold the view that children learn about print by manipulating it for their own purposes, we recommend that teachers provide opportunities and encouragement for children to read and write frequently. Because reading skills are learned from reading, we propose that children be encouraged to read about subjects that are interesting to them and that they already know a great deal about. Primary and vital to this condition is the opportunity for children to select from materials on a variety of topics written in many genres. We also propose that they write frequently, however nonconventionally, about what is important to them. As they write, using the same cueing systems as in reading--graphophonic, semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic--children are intent on producing text that will communuicate a particular meaning to a reader. This contract between writer and reader evolves as learners use text to create their own special meanings.

Talking Books and Taped Books

In order to relate background, nonvisual information to the graphic, visual information on the

page, we recommend activities which involve the young reader in following along in the text while it is being read orally. Chomsky (1976) discovered that an activity as simple as having children follow along looking at the print in a text while listening to a tape of the material being read produced dramatic improvements in the reading fluency, comprehension abilitiy and attitude of eight-year-old disabled readers. She had the children use earphones to follow along in a text while listening to it read aloud on tape. The children continued to listen and follow along with the text until they could read it fluently. The child then selected another text and the procedure was repeated.

It has been our experience that the number of listenings necessary to achieve fluency depends on the child's interest in reading and the predictability of the material. Poetry, with its predictable rhythm and rhyme for example, requires fewer listenings to attain fluency than does less predictable prose.

We have found the Danish practice of using talking books and taped books described by Gamby (1983) to be a refinement of Chomsky's procedure. Gamby regards

talking books as those recorded at a normal reading rate. The talking book is used to provide the reader with the opportunity to become very familiar with the text. Taped books are recorded at a rate slightly slower than normal reading so that readers may practice reading along while listening to the tape.

Because children select the talking book they want to read and thus demonstrate interest in the topic, we have found that three listening sessions are usually sufficient for the young reader to become quite familiar with the text. We then have them practice by listening to the slower taped book and reading along silently. For the read-along activity, it is essential that the children be given access to individual tape players since they often lose their place in the early going and need to go back to the beginning of the tape.

Once young readers become willing to read along while listening to a tape, fluency in reading usually comes very fast. A very small number of students, however, enjoy listening to the tapes but do not like to practice reading along with the slow tape. For these students, we have discovered that reading aloud to the student and stopping periodically in the middle

of a sentence for the reader to supply the next word engages the student in meaning-making without the frustration of being slowed down. After the student has supplied the word or familiar phrase, the reader continues reading with periodic pauses for the student to supply missing text. Once the student gets the hang of reading along, the pleasure of the activity seems to maintain the student's interest.

Shared Book Experience

Even though teachers usually have little difficulty managing the use of talking books and taped books with a classroom of students, provided there is an adequate number of tape players, the activity primarily involves students listening and reading by themselves. While these individual activities are both enjoyable and instructional, children profit from group activities as well.

We have found a procedure commonly used in Australia and New Zealand to be exceedingly effective in engaging small groups of children in reading. The Australians and New Zealanders refer to the activity as Shared-Book-Experience (Holdaway, 1979). Many American primary teachers now use them as well.

This activity involves the use of what is called a Big Book, since it contains print large enough to be read at a distance of about fifteen feet. The language of the stories is rhythmical and predictable. Big Books are now commercially available in the United States, but since they are not difficult to construct, many teachers are making them in their classrooms, responding immediately to their children's special interests and backgrounds of experience.

Although the Shared Book Experience is a group activity, it is similar to the age-old bedtime story in that young children often request the same story be read and reread until they become so familiar with the language that they seem to know it by heart. The teacher reads the story from the big book to the group of children several times while pointing at the words as s/he reads aloud. The repeated modeling by the teacher and the shared social community of the readers is an expressive and dramatic interpretation of the text (Johnson and Louis, 1986), not simply a decoding of it.

After the children have heard the teacher read the story from the Big Book three or four times, the

children join the teacher in a choral interpretation of the text. Again the teacher should encourage their reading to be a dramatic interpretation. Once the children become very familiar with the text, the teacher can ask individual children to read selected short portions of the text expressively.

The children who are likely to have the least difficulty reading orally should be called upon first followed by the other children reading the same segment. Children should not be called upon to read lengthy segments, and they should not be asked to read until they have sufficient background information about the story to be able to read their portion with ease.

The next step involves the teacher reading aloud while pointing to the words, stopping periodically and nodding to a child who is to supply the next word. When conducting this activity, teachers should encourage everyone to look at the print as it is being read to them. After the children are able to read the story well, even if it is largely from memory, they are ready to go on to another big book.

It has been our experience that the small group works well when it involves about a third of the whole

class, about ten or fewer. Since children's zone of proximal development is enhanced by peer models, we recommend heterogeneous rather than homogeneous grouping.

We also suggest that the selection of Big Book stories be based on student interest and natural language rather than controlled vocabulary. Several current references, including Johnson and Lewis (1985), provide an excellent list of books suitable for this activity and describe several other activities involving Big Books.

Reading and Writing: Reciprocal Processes

Reading and writing have been referred to as composing processes (Tierney & Pearson, 1983) in which meaning is constructed by the learner, not just transmitted by the text. According to Goodman's model of reading (in Gollasch, 1982), the construction of text, whether in reading or in writing, involves three major cognitive/linguistic processes: predicting, confirming/correcting, and integrating. Those cognitive/linguistic processes are activated in both reading and writing so that as the language learner

engages in either activity, literacy competencies develop.

Both readers and writers bring personal background, attitudes about the value of reading and writing, and attitudes about themselves as readers and writers to the literacy event. Readers set purposes for reading, identify appropriate background information, predict and infer, search for relationships, confirm and self-correct, synthesize and evaluate. In much the same way, writers identify appropriate background information needed by the reader, predict and infer about their audiences, and build relationships, revise, synthesize and evaluate.

Readers attempt to reconstruct an author's intention by identifying main ideas, recognizing supporting detail, following sequences, discovering relationsips and, consequently, learn about linguistic structures. Writers select main ideas, organize supporting detail, discover relationships and, consequently, learn about linguistic structures.

Readers discover the need/function of convention as the need to know transacts with the community's agreement about vocabulary, spelling and form.

Consequently, the reader comes to understands that these are largely arbitrary decisions but nonetheless important. Writers come to understand and develop a shared language and a shared meaning as they choose from negotiated conventions those which best meet their needs.

When we consider that reading and writing are related in such important ways, we may extend our notion that readers learn to read by reading to the contention that children learn to read by reading and writing. One cannot read without reading something someone has written. When one writes, one reads and rereads to see what one has said and whether it has made sense to a chosen audience.

We do not mean to say that reading and writing are connected in either a simple or a direct way. But if we consider reading to be making sense of print, then intent, purpose, background information, attitude--all are critical ingredients of meaning-making from text, whether learned through reading or through writing.

Conclusions

Children learn the functions and value of print by manipulating it for their own purposes in an environment that supports their intent to mean. Writing their own books and publishing them for their peers and others to read helps children understand the power of written language. Reading those same texts, and watching others read them, helps children understand the connection between reading a text and the decisions made by the author who wrote it. Other writing activities that require response from a reader include letters to pen pals and classmates, directions to student-designed games and puzzles, and journals that teachers, parents and/or peers may respond to in a kind of written dialogue.

Teachers help young learners make reading/writing connections by allowing and encouraging these meaning-filled, high interest, functional activities to occur. And they monitor and correct where needed, helping to sustain that fluid movement between clutch and brake when the light turns green.

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